

Walkers warn Angelenos about human trafficking and slavery

Written by R. W. DELLINGER

Women religious join with other members of LA Metro Task Force on Human Trafficking in Freedom Walk and Fair.

"Your activism is tipping the point of bringing slavery and human trafficking out of the darkness and lifting the veil for countless who cry every day because they are oppressed, who stand in corners of buildings because they have nowhere to sleep. This is a terrible, terrible situation, and your involvement will — and has — made a difference...."

"Today there are over 12.3 million women, men, boys and girls around the world who are forced to work under threats of violence and isolated from anyone who can help them. Whether it's in the manual labor of sweat shops in Beverly Hills or sexual slavery in Los Angeles County, where traffickers profit from racial and sexual abuse, this crime exists in staggering numbers, and we can no longer stand and allow that to continue to exist."

Then Jerome Horton, chairman of the California State Board of Equalization, told the roughly 350 people gathered Jan. 7 in the Millennium Biltmore Hotel downtown for the third annual LA Freedom Walk and Fair, "Today, every step you take moves us closer to abolishing slavery in America once and for all."

This year's Saturday morning event, sponsored by the LA Metro Task Force on Human Trafficking and participating anti-slavery organizations, divided participants into a dozen groups. They walked through the garment and jewelry districts, engaging street vendors, shop workers and just people on the street with information about human trafficking, including how to recognize and report victims.

"We're here participating in this walk today with many other religious congregations of Sisters because we want to put out awareness about this heinous crime — human trafficking, which is modern-day slavery," Maria Elena Perales, justice coordinator of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, told The Tidings before the walk began.

The congregation supports a shelter in Orange County for trafficked women, offering mentoring and life skills to survivors of slavery. "You know, we hear about these things happening in other parts of the world like Asian and Africa, but we never think about it being here locally, especially in Orange County," Perales pointed out. "But there's a lot of slave labor taking place there — domestic workers, sex trafficking — especially in the enclosed communities."

Nearby, six students from Ramona Convent Secondary School in Alhambra were also getting ready to walk. Heading the group were two juniors, Alexis Coria and Clarissa Figueroa, who started the anti-trafficking "Voices for Hope" organization at their all-girls' high school this year.

"Definitely, we're trying to make more awareness and to show that if we all come together we can do something about this horrible reality we call human trafficking," Coria said. "And then it really impacts on women and children. Knowing that there's someone my age out there not in a warm bed, not with a family being forced to do something — that's just sickening, really upsets me. That's why we're so passionate."

Figueroa was nodding. “We wanted to bring this to Ramona because we’re an all-girls’ school,” she said. “So it hits home for a lot of the girls. People just want to ignore it and make it go under the rug. But the reality is all teenagers should know about the signs because it could happen to you or someone that you love.”

Underground trade

Out walking on the sidewalks, some groups chanted, “Stop human trafficking!” “No more slavery!” or “End demand: Kids are not for sale!” Others held up placards saying, “Offense against human dignity — Human Trafficking” or “Enslaved domestic workers — Just because you can’t see them doesn’t mean they’re not there.”

“We’re out here to educate, which is what women religious have always done, but to educate the public about this form of unregulated trade,” said Holy Names of Jesus and Mary Sister Jo’Ann De Quattro during a break from passing out fliers with information about human trafficking. “You know, we talk about ‘free trade,’ ‘fair trade.’ This is ‘unregulated trade,’ and it’s one of the biggest industries globally. Completely unregulated and underground — the trafficking of women and children, especially, but trafficking of all forms and exploitation.”

The seasoned social activist and former educator chuckled when she noted how this was her first demonstration that started and ended in a tony five-star hotel. But the member of WOW (the Wall of Women, which is part of CAST, the Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking) described it as “great” and was especially pleased at the number of students who came out on a Saturday to participate.

“This is supposed to be the generation that only cares about themselves, and I refuse to believe that,” she said. “I think you just have to expose them to some injustice and they have an innate sense of righteousness. They’ll respond because they want to act — like today.”

Another LA Freedom Walker, Religious Sister of Charity Kathy Bryant, observed that women religious and congregations have always read the “sign of the times” to look out for social as well as spiritual needs that aren’t being addressed. She noted that Sisters were among the first groups to take care of and house orphans. They were also on the front lines when the AIDS/HIV epidemic broke out in the 1970s and ’80s around the world.

“Now I think the issue is human trafficking, with most religious congregations having made a commitment through their chapters to focus on it,” said Sister Bryant. “Internationally, some convents became safe houses. Sisters are on the front lines of creating awareness, of getting people to engage with the anti-slavery nonprofits like CAST and working collaboratively. So we’re doing a lot of interfaith work on this, which is exciting.”

Connie McGhee was a block behind her walking group because the principal of Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Los Angeles had stopped to talk with two men at a street corner. When she informed them that human trafficking was currently the second most lucrative business in the world, one replied: “I had no idea.”

“It’s amazing to me how many people have no idea,” McGhee said. “You know, at our Southern California Partners for Global Justice meetings we always talk about making the general population aware. And we talk about going into colleges and high schools as well. But I think our seventh- and eighth-graders also need to know about human trafficking. They need to be aware for no other reason than to protect themselves.”

Elizabeth Alvarez readily agreed. She and her husband, Marcello Jr., were out walking with their three children — Isabella, 13, Marcello III, 11, and Samantha Bernadette, 7, who attend Resurrection School in East L.A. “I think it’s important that I’m here with my husband and children because the awareness needs to start somewhere,” the 34-year-old mother said. “And when somebody asks my kids ‘What did you do this walk for?’ they can tell them.

“We’re talking not only about children from around the world and in the United States, but from our neighborhoods in East L.A. It’s an area that has a lot of poverty, and people are ready to take advantage of that. But I raised my children to be very outspoken and stand up for themselves and for other people. And I want them not only to stop the bullies here at home but there’s bullies around the world. And that’s why we’re here.”

Survivors' stories

After the walkers returned to the Millennium Biltmore Hotel before noon, Kay Buck, executive director of CAST, briefly addressed them. She also reported that while many shopkeepers and pedestrians acknowledged that human trafficking happened in other countries, they often remarked how it surely didn't occur in the United States, California and Los Angeles today.

Buck countered this naive view with U.S. State Department statistics that every year 15,000 to 18,000 men, women and children are being trafficked into the nation. "And Los Angeles is well known as being one of the top three points of entry," she declared. "So just imagine how many modern-day slaves are actually here right in our backyard?"

Then, to a hushed audience, two "survivors" spoke.

Angela Guanzon, 34, told how she was brought to Southern California from the Philippines in 2005 by a Filipino woman who ran two assisted-living facilities in Long Beach. Not long after arriving, the trafficker said she owed her \$12,000 for the trip and that it would take 10 years of work to pay off the debt. She was also warned not to talk to anybody outside the facilities or she would be arrested and send back home.

Guanzon found herself working 18-hour days, with only the promise of a day off that never came. She slept in hallways or on a couch, but often had to get up in the middle of the night to attend to elderly patients. "I was miserable, but I didn't have a choice," she explained. "Either I'm going to be in jail or with her."

After about 2 ½ years, a retired neighbor noticing that Guanzon and the other workers hardly ever left the premises contacted the police. They intervened and referred her to the LA Metro Task Force on Human Trafficking, who put her in contact with CAST. The anti-slavery organization provided her with support, education and housing. Today, she's a certified nursing assistant working in Santa Monica.

"I know that there are more victims like me out there," Guanzon warned. "So you need to be vigilant and aware of your surroundings."

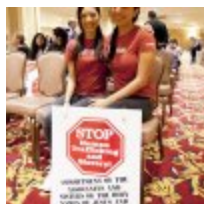
D'Lita Miller declared that she was also a survivor of human trafficking — specifically, sex trafficking. A runaway at 14 from Compton, the 37-year-old woman said that she was "brainwashed" into thinking that her family would no longer help her and the only way she could survive was by selling herself. At 15 she had her first child; four more were to follow over the years.

She tried to break away, even taking classes at a city college, but always relapsed as a struggling single mom. "One thing that I've realized as a survivor is that even though we have freedom from trafficking our minds aren't set free yet," Miller observed. "So it took me many years, and I'm still struggling for my mind to be set free."

What finally helped her change, ironically, was finding out last year that her own 16-year-old daughter was involved in the same kind of local sex trafficking as she had been dragged into. Since then she's devoted her life through an anti-slavery organization, "Saving Innocence," to advocate against sex trafficking.

"I understand that human trafficking is a worldwide situation," Miller said. "However, I would like to stand here today and let you know that it is really becoming very common in our streets. In the streets of Compton, San Pedro, Hollywood Boulevard, the San Fernando Valley, the new trafficking game is being run by gang members and drug dealers. And they are recruiting our children as young as middle school."

To contact CAST (Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking), visit www.CASTLA.org or call the intake line: (888) 539-2373. The National Human Trafficking Hotline is (888) 3737.888.



"VOICES FOR HOPE" — Ramona Convent juniors Alexis Coria (left) and Clarissa Figueroa started the anti-trafficking "Voices for Hope" group at their all-girls' high school. VICTOR ALEMAN



CSJs AFOOT — Sister Catherine Marie Kreta (left), board president of CAST (Coalition to Abolish Slavery & Trafficking), and members of her congregation march with banner in downtown Los Angeles Jan. 7. VICTOR ALEMAN



YOUNG ACTIVIST — Seven-year-old Samantha Bernadette Alvarez leads members of her family and others during LA Freedom Walk. VICTOR ALEMAN



"SURVIVORS" — Ima Matul from Indonesia (left) and Angela Guanzon from the Philippines were victims of modern-day slavery. VICTOR ALEMAN



POSTER OF PAIN — A woman's placard expresses the untold tragic cost of human trafficking. VICTOR ALEMAN

<http://www.the-tidings.com/index.php/features/template-styles/2199-walkers-warn-angelenos-about-human-trafficking-and-slavery>